

January 26, 2007

Mr. Chair, members of the Committee, for the record my name is Connie Phelps (C-O-N-N-I-E P-H-E-L-P-S). I am the Director of Montana Telecommunications Access Program, a position in state government. I am here today on my own behalf and on personal leave. My previous position was that of Coordinator of Deaf Services for Livingston School District. Prior to that, I served as Coordinator of Deaf Services for Belgrade School District. I have been an interpreter for over 25 years. I have my educational interpreter certification and have served on the Board of Directors for the Montana Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

I believe this legislation is long overdue. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allows all Deaf and hard of hearing students in Montana the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). 25% of Montana parents have made the choice to send their Deaf or hard of hearing child to the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind (MSDB). 75% more parents have chosen to keep their children home and educate them in their local public school.

Unless a child has a teacher who is fluent in sign language, our Deaf students are receiving a second hand education. If the student does not have a skilled interpreter and a knowledgeable teacher of the Deaf, their education deteriorates even more. Imagine going to school and speaking a different language than all the others, and then having to depend on someone who has a rudimentary knowledge of your language. Maybe they even have a language dictionary and try to interpret the lesson looking up key words. A skilled sign language interpreter does more than convey key words. They understand the educational process, understand their role in the classroom and assist the student in accessing their environment.

It is impossible to have teachers fluent in sign language in every classroom for our Deaf students. During my time in Livingston and Belgrade, both rural school districts, the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind played a key role in assuring the students we served were getting the best education possible. MSDB's outreach consultant was a tremendous support and resource. Every school district with Deaf or hard of hearing students needs that support and resource.

Today, I urge you to support HB 354 and make a difference for our Deaf and hard of hearing students. By requiring standards for teachers of the deaf and interpreters and providing more outreach consultants, our students will have the opportunity to learn. Thank you.

Connie Phelps
1024 N. Davis
Helena, MT 59601
(406) 579-6335
cbphelps@bresnan.net